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ABSTRACT

Focusing on early childhood issues specific to New Zealand, this document is comprised of three papers exploring provision of culturally competent care in early childhood services. The first paper, "Considering Culture" (Lisa Terreni with Judi McCallum), addresses some current theories that attempt to understand "culture" and examines some of the concepts underlying theories of inter-cultural communication. Also examined is the implications of understanding ideas about culture and inter-cultural communication for early childhood practitioners from the dominant culture. The second paper, "Developing Dialogue" (Lisa Terreni), notes that dialogue enables practitioners to discover the beliefs and experiences that parents and children from different cultural backgrounds bring to early childhood programs, and examines ways in which teachers can engage and develop meaningful dialogue with these parents. The third paper, "Parents' Experiences of Different Early Childhood Pedagogies" (Lisa Terreni) recounts interviews with three parents from different cultural backgrounds whose children experienced early childhood services in their countries and also attended early childhood services in New Zealand. At the end of each interview, analysis is provided of points of difference that practitioners may want to consider as topics for discussion with parents. The countries of origin of the three parents were Jordan, India, and China. (HTH)

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Providing Culturally Competent Care in Early Childhood Services in New Zealand Part 1: Considering Culture [and] Part 2: Developing Dialogue [and] Part 3: Parents' Experineces of Different Early Childhood Pedagogies

Lisa Terreni and Judi McCallum

Early Childhood Development Unit, Wellington (New Zealand)

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Providing culturally competent care in early childhood services in New Zealand

Part 1 : Considering Culture

Early Childhood Development
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Considering culture

Lisa Terreni with Judi McCallum

New Zealand, an island nation once relatively isolated from the rest of the world, is experiencing, like many nations, increasing immigration and resettlement by peoples from around the globe.

Statistics from the Ministry of Education show that the percentages of children attending early childhood services from different ethnic backgrounds have increased over the past 10 years[1]. It is very likely that early childhood practitioners will, during the course of their teaching careers, work with children and families who come from different ethnic backgrounds and who bring with them the different experiences, customs and values embedded in their particular cultures.

Increasingly, early childhood practitioners are considering theories that address issues of bi-cultural and multi-cultural education. However, in my experience as a professional development facilitator, practitioners often skip the debate on what culture actually 'is', in their efforts to try and deal with the 'what should be done'.

This paper addresses some of the current theories that attempt to understand 'culture' and examines some of the concepts underlying theories of inter-cultural communication. It examines how understanding ideas about culture and inter-cultural communication has implications for early childhood education practitioners from the dominant culture.

What is culture?

"Culture can be a set of fundamental ideas, practices and experiences of a group of people that are symbolically transmitted generation to generation through a learning process. Culture may as well refer to the beliefs, norms, and attitudes that are used to guide our behaviours and solve problems." (Chen and Starosta, 1998, p 25).

Culture is multi-layered. Overt signs of culture manifest themselves in symbols or phenomena that are *concrete and explicit* e.g. language, festivals, food, and dress. It is often these overt signs that are most easily identifiable and which can be more easily shared with others. However, the *implicit and subconscious* assumptions individuals hold about existence determine the beliefs, norms and attitudes of a culture. These lie beneath the concrete and explicit manifestations of the culture and are often more difficult to identify or be aware of.

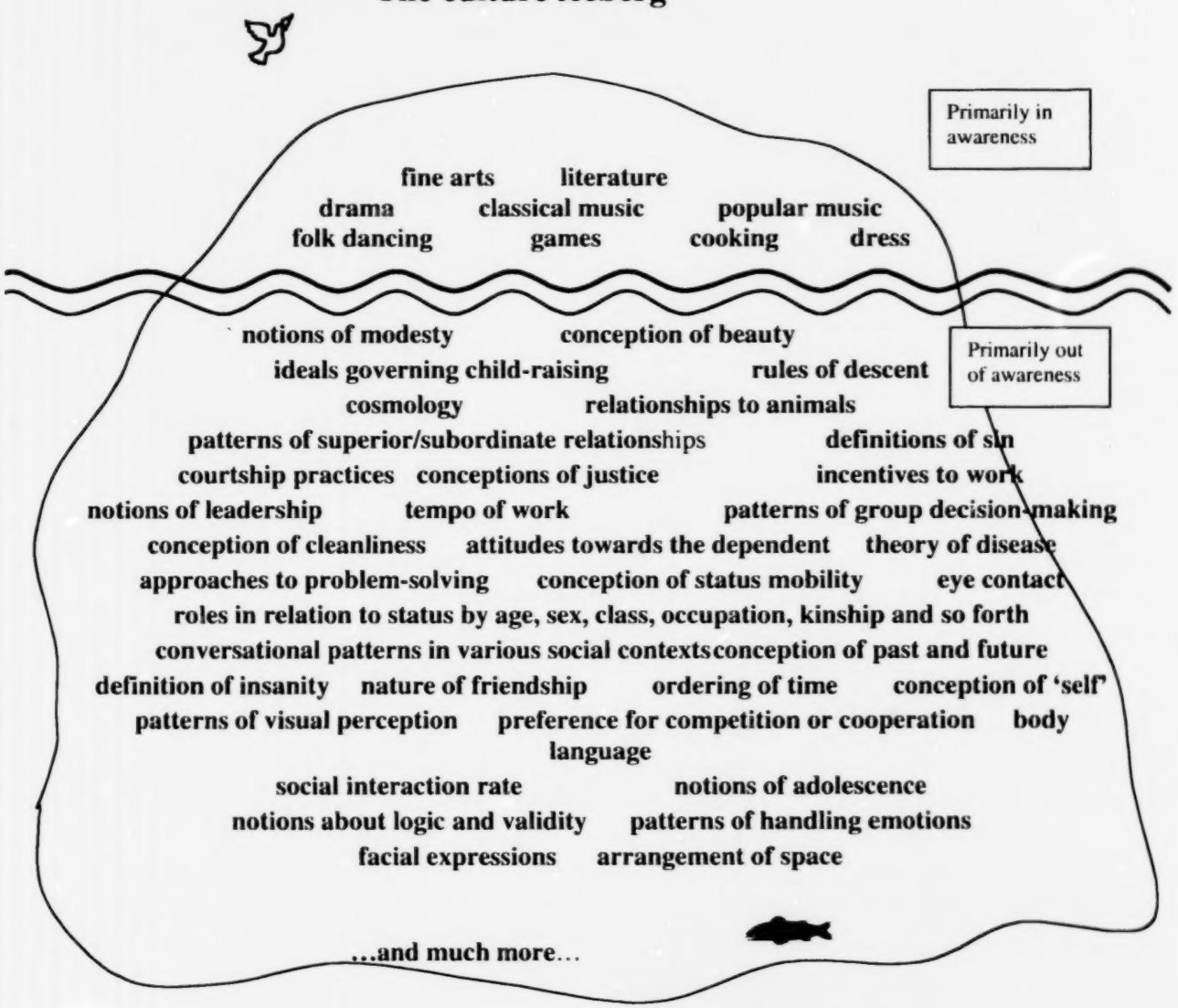
Early childhood practitioners, in their efforts to be culturally inclusive, often explore with children the concrete and explicit aspects of different cultures. For example by including a wide variety of different cultural objects in the family area, providing a range of culturally diverse dress-ups, preparing, cooking and eating different types of food, presenting photographs and art

[1] Ministry of Education statistics (www.minedu.govt.nz) for 1995 show the percentage of children enrolled in early childhood services: 18.73% Maori, 6.12% Pacific Islands, 2.32% Asian, 2.8% other, 70.65% European/Pakeha. For 2001 statistics show: 18.51% Maori, 6.16% Pacific Islands, 4.56% Asian, 1.48% other, 69.37% Pakeha.

objects from different cultures in the environment. It is also in these areas that parents often make valid contributions to the programme, e.g. by teaching a song or telling a story from their culture, or preparing food.

However, increasing one's knowledge of the implicit beliefs and orientations that inform the practices of a culture can lead to deeper understanding of cultural difference and increase the possibility of quality inter-cultural communication.

The culture iceberg



Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1998) provide a framework for unpacking the implicit assumptions about culture that are more difficult to access. They do this by identifying three issues common to all cultures: relationships with people, relationships with time and relationships with nature. These three issues are universals, however the way cultures resolve

these issues is where cultural difference lies. It is useful to examine these three dimensions more closely.

Relationships with people

The way in which human beings deal with each other depends very much on the way their culture determines their 'relational orientation' (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 1998). These orientations can be described as:

- Individualism or communitarianism
- Neutral or emotional
- Achievement or ascription
- Specific or diffuse
- Universalism or particularism

The orientations need to be viewed as being on continuums rather than polarised. Very often a culture will fall somewhere in the middle of the continuum rather than at one end or the other.

Individualism or communitarianism (the individual or the group)

A culture that has its prime orientation to the self (individualism) places the needs and wants of the individual first. Underlying this cultural orientation is the belief that once individual needs are met, the individual is then better able to contribute to the group.

A culture that has a prime orientation to common goals and objectives (communitarianism) will consider these first. This cultural orientation perceives that the community must be strong to adequately meet the needs of individuals.

The following procedures in a work place may be threatening to staff, parents or children coming from one or other of these orientations:

- Encouraging independence rather than dependence
- Singling out an individual for praise or special attention
- Seeking consensus rather than majority rule
- Prioritising individual goals rather than family goals

Janet Gonzalez-Mena (2002) describes a conflict between a parent and caregiver over the amount of assistance given to a child attempting to dress herself. The caregiver's perception of infancy is framed by her culture in which she views infants as needing to be taught independent self-help skills so they will develop as individuals. The parent, coming from a culture which values personal connectedness sees dependency in childhood as an important way of maintaining the ties that bind family.

As a kindergarten teacher once working in a predominantly Pakeha community in New Zealand, I was alerted to this cultural difference when I approached a Chinese mother who was staying at kindergarten with her child every day. I was curious to find out why the mother wanted to stay and felt it was important to let this mother know her child would develop some independence by being left at kindergarten on her own. Despite my good intentions the mother was rather taken

back by my approach and told me that her time with her child was very precious, and she wanted to be with her child as much as she could before the child went to school.

Caring for the young and the elderly in communitarian cultures is often something that is shared by the wider family. Early childhood practitioners should be aware that the parenting of children from a communitarian culture might not be the sole responsibility of the biological parents.

Neutral or emotional (the range of feelings expressed)

Reason and emotion both play a role in relationships between people. A culture in which members do not overtly communicate their feelings and keep them more controlled and subdued is described as being affectively (emotionally) neutral. There is an emphasis on 'rational' rather than 'emotional' processes.

A culture which is much more expressive emotionally uses a more expressive style of communicating. There is more overt 'laughing, smiling, grimacing, scowling, gesturing' (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 1998) as people attempt to find outlets for their emotions. Neutral cultures tend to use humour, understatement and irony rather than emoting overtly. The tolerance of silence, tone, use of words, and the amount of non-verbal communication, such as eye contact, distance, touch and gesture, also depend on cultural orientation.

Recently, a Pakeha friend flew home after visiting her father who had just had a major stroke. She sat next to a Māori woman and in the course of the flight they began to converse. After my friend described the reason for her trip, her companion remarked that she thought Pakeha people really didn't express their emotions very much. Slightly taken aback by this analysis, my friend replied that actually her family had been in tears all weekend. However, it had been her controlled description of the reason for her visit that had prompted her companion's remark.

In early childhood contexts it is important to consider the cultural background of children and their parents in relation to how feelings and emotions are expressed. Knowing that different cultures emote differently can reduce negative judgments about people.

Achievement or ascription (how status is accorded)

How status is assigned to people differs significantly from culture to culture. In some cultures individuals are accorded higher status on the basis of their achievements (achieved status). This differs greatly from cultures that give individuals higher status due to their age, class, gender, profession or education (ascribed status). For example, in Pakeha society it is not unusual to find young educated women in positions of responsibility and leadership whose age, appearance and gender would not be accorded the same status in a culture that ascribes status.

It is important for early childhood educators to find out how status is determined in the particular ethnic communities using their service. This can help make the most effective and appropriate links with communities. For example, in Pacific Islands communities ministers of the church and their wives have high status and influence. Consequently, developing relationship with local ministers can be beneficial. There may some circumstances where it is more appropriate for initial meetings with parents to be conducted by the head teacher, supervisor, or a staff member who is older and more experienced.

Specific or diffuse (the range of personal involvement)

Cultures that perceive relationships as being specific tend to keep relationships in separate areas. This means that the status associated with a relationship will be likely to remain within the context of that relationship. For example, the status of a teacher tends to be confined to the specific context of the school and does not necessarily flow on into other relationships outside of this context.

Diffuse cultures tend to have relationships that are less segregated. This means the status accompanying a person's occupation, for example, is carried with them into other areas of their life rather than being confined to the work context.

It is useful for early childhood practitioners to be aware of the specific/diffuse orientation of different cultures they are working with. The status of teachers is often very high in some cultures, and the respect (mana) that accompanies this, extends beyond the classroom door into the wider community. It is important. I believe, for practitioners to acknowledge this deference to their position and to be aware that there may be an expectation of formality in this relationship.

Another aspect of specific or diffuse orientations involves personal space and public space. In a 'specific' culture the public space tends to be large and segregated into many sections, which means that a member of this culture may have a relationship with someone in a particular context but not in another. For example, a person may have a relationship with someone at work but this relationship may not carry over into a social context. People from specific cultures are often perceived as very friendly, relaxed and accessible because admitting someone into one area of their public lives is not necessarily a big commitment.

In contrast, in a diffuse culture a person's life space is harder to enter and permission is needed to 'come in'. The public space is relatively small and the private space large and diffuse, which means that once admitted as a friend, admission is granted into many aspects of the person's private life. International students often comment that although Pakeha New Zealanders are extremely friendly people you may never be invited into their houses.

I recently worked with a group of parents from Latin America who wanted to start a Spanish-speaking playgroup. Developing and building a personal relationship with the group was important in terms of establishing respect for and trust in my expertise, but most importantly for developing a level of friendship that extended beyond the usual professional relationship with playgroups.

Universalism or particularism (rules or relationships)

Cultures that share an obligation to adhere to standards universally agreed upon (the laws and rules of a culture) are described as universalist cultures. There is a belief that, by applying set rules to everybody, all people are treated as equals.

Cultures that have a primary focus on people and focus on the exceptional circumstances of a situation can be described as particularist cultures. Particularist cultures focus on 'the exceptional

nature of a present circumstance' (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner,1998: 31). Rules can, at times, be disregarded as the importance of a relationship takes precedence.

Although these two positions seem polarised, the reality of the situation is that often both kinds of judgements are used. For example, in early childhood contexts the particular circumstances of a family or child may involve a bending of the rules. For example, as a kindergarten teacher I was occasionally requested by a parent, who had particular difficulties in arranging for a child to be collected on time, to care for the child a little longer. To me, these particular circumstances often warranted a change in the rules.

Relationships with time

How cultures orient themselves to the past, present and future differs. Cultures that place a high value on tradition, relationships with ancestors and strong family ties generally have an orientation to the past, e.g. Māori and Japanese cultures. Successes, achievements, knowledge and wisdom gained from the past have a place in guiding behaviour in the present and future.

However, some cultures have an orientation to the present. As the past is seen as unimportant and the future vague and unpredictable, only the here and now is deemed important.

Cultures that have a future orientation tend to view change as highly important and the future as being potentially bolder, brighter and better than the past or present.

Time management

Whether time is managed sequentially or synchronically can also depend on cultural orientation. Time can be viewed as a social construct that enables members of a culture to coordinate their activities.

Time can be seen as **sequential,** i.e. a line of events that happen in sequence and pass at regular intervals. Those who think sequentially view everything as having a time and a place, and changes to this can create levels of uncertainty. For sequential people, schedules and time slots are of prime importance. Punctuality is important, and lateness can cause great anxiety. "Time is viewed as a commodity to be used up and lateness deprives the other of precious minutes in a world where 'time is money'" (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner,1998: 128)

Conversely, **synchronic** methods of time management usually involve activities happening in parallel. Ways of reaching particular goals may involve a more circuitous route. Synchronic cultures are less concerned with people being servants of time; rather time is seen as the servant of people. Less concerned with punctuality and schedules, synchronic people consider their relationships with others as having higher priority and consequently needing more time.

For early childhood practitioners an understanding about orientation to time is important particularly when entering into cultural contexts that are different from their own. For example, when attending hui on a marae, it is useful to know that a great deal of time will be spent on protocol and establishing links with the past. The actual getting down to business may also take some time due to the need to establish relationships within the group e.g. through use of mihi - where everyone has a formal opportunity to introduce themselves to the group.

Awareness about different orientations to time can help foster understanding about time management behaviours that might appear rude or discourteous. It has been my experience that those involved in the parenting and education of young children often manage time sequentially and synchronically. For example, I recently met with the playgroup coordinator of a rural playgroup. I needed to sit with her to check administrative details and discuss the progress of the group. She was able to meet with me and discuss the business, breast feed her baby and support her other child's creative endeavour all at the same time!

Relationships with nature

How cultures relate to nature and the different forces created by natural events also determine certain beliefs and behaviours. Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1998)
describe two main orientations to nature: societies that believe nature can be controlled by humans through the imposition of human 'will' or societies which believe that humans are part of nature and must abide by the directions and forces of nature .

In highly industrialised societies, like the United States, Australia and the United Kingdom, the mastery-over-nature view is quite dominant. Physical control of the environment by machines and technology are ways of controlling nature, but so too are advances in medicine which control illness and disease. This view sees nature as something that can be controlled and subjugated by the individual and extols the belief that humans control their own destinies.

A cultural orientation that sees society as a product of nature emphasises its relationship to the environment and the need to respond to external circumstances. It is not seen as weakness to accept the arbitrary nature of events that can occur beyond the control of human beings.

According to Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1998: 153) western business managers are often surprised at their 'success' in imposing their procedures and methods on other cultures. This occurs because some of these cultures "are accustomed to being heavily influenced from external sources and taking their cue from the environment." But they caution that it is a mistake to assume that "**accepting** guidance from outside is the same as internalising it or using it successfully." They add that these cultures do not like to debate or confront, and directives that seem to be accepted are not actually considered appropriate. Similar situations arise in an early childhood context. Many early childhood educators have expressed frustration with parents from different cultural groups who appear to have acknowledged and understood information or directives given to them by staff but later their actions reveal that this information has not been taken on board.

Conclusion

Political policies such as integration and assimilation, that have been part of New Zealand's history, have resulted in the domination of white, European culture over indigenous Māori culture and other minority cultures living in New Zealand. As a consequence, mainstream early childhood pedagogy in New Zealand is essentially a product of the majority culture's underlying value base and beliefs about the education of young children (Canella, 1997). It is vital that practitioners do not assume that the values and philosophies embedded in mainstream early childhood services are shared by all the families who attend.

Although there is a degree of diversity in early childhood pedagogies being implemented in New Zealand such as Te Kohanga Reo and Aoga Amata, practitioners in mainstream early childhood services have a responsibility to ensure that families from different cultures understand the assumptions upon which their early childhood programmes are based. In other words, practitioners need to consciously 'unpack' underlying theories and philosophies for families so the cultural messages inherent in the programme are made as explicit as possible. The framework outlined in this paper may help in this process.

Developing good relationships with parents and families so that practitioners can begin to engage in meaningful dialogue with parents is the most successful way for teachers to begin the process. This dialogue enables practitioners to discover the beliefs and experiences parents and children from different cultural backgrounds bring to the early childhood centre. The next article in this series *Creating culturally competent care in early childhood services in New Zealand - Part 2: Developing dialogue* examines ways in which teachers can engage in and develop meaningful dialogue with parents from diverse cultures.

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The authors

Lisa Terreni (Dip Kindergarten Teaching, B.Ed) works as a professional development facilitator for Early Childhood Development, Wellington, New Zealand.

Judi McCallum (Dip Teaching, B.A, M.A Applied Linguistics) lectures in languages, inter-cultural communication and teacher training at Massey University, Wellington, New Zealand.

Providing culturally competent care in early childhood services in New Zealand

Part 2 : Developing Dialogue

Early Childhood Development
Nga Kaitaunaki Kohungahunga
RIGHT FROM THE START

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Developing dialogue

Lisa Terreni

The first paper in this series *Providing culturally competent care in early childhood services in New Zealand - Part 1: Considering culture* examined some current theory on 'culture', some of the concepts underlying successful inter-cultural communication, and their implications for early childhood education practitioners. The paper concluded with a call for mainstream early childhood practitioners to ensure that families from different cultures understand the premises upon which early childhood education programmes in New Zealand are based, by consciously 'unpacking' underlying theories and philosophies for families.

Developing good relationships with parents and families so that practitioners can begin to engage in meaningful dialogue with parents is the most successful way for teachers to begin to 'unpack' the early childhood education programme for parents. Dialogue enables practitioners to discover the beliefs and experiences that parents and children from different cultural backgrounds bring to their new experiences with early childhood programmes in New Zealand.

This paper examines ways in which teachers can engage and develop meaningful dialogue with parents from diverse cultures. It presents ideas for developing meaningful dialogue by drawing from my own teaching experiences, both as teacher and early childhood professional development facilitator, the writings and experiences of other early childhood educators working in diverse communities, and interviews with parents themselves.

Janet Gonzalez-Mena in her book *Multicultural issues in child care* states, 'It's good for children to receive culturally competent care that is sensitive and has a global, multiethnic view' (2001, p17). An experienced childcare provider and an advocate for increased awareness of multi-cultural issues in early childhood education services, Gonzalez-Mena describes the essential requirements for providing culturally competent care as:

- respect – for children, parents and teachers;
- parents and teachers understanding that each may have different perspectives on early childhood education;
- parents, teachers and caregivers understanding that the values embedded in an early childhood education programme may differ from family values;
- parents and teachers finding ways to accommodate differences, and for teachers and parents to create 'ongoing dialogues' with each other.

Teachers and caregivers working in early childhood services are regularly talking to the parents of the children who attend their service. However, it has been my observation that often these conversations and discussions are snatched during a busy teaching session or as parents drop off or collect their children. Sustained conversations where shared points of view are established, and different points of view and experiences are clarified, can be something of luxury in a busy teaching schedule.

I became aware that developing dialogue with parents can be problematic for a variety of reasons. For example, some parents are very shy and are not confident enough to stay at the

centre. Conversely, sometimes parents believe that their children must learn to get along without them and fend for themselves in the new cultural environment. Sometimes talking to the children can be easier than talking to their parents as children often have a greater command of English than their parents. For parents using full day childcare services as opposed to sessional services, time constraints and parents' commitment to paid employment may create even less opportunities for dialogue. However, there are two ways of engaging in dialogue that I believe can deepen and extend the relationship between practitioners and parents.

Spontaneous dialogue

For many years I was the head teacher of a kindergarten in a multi-ethnic, low socio-economic community in Wellington, New Zealand. It was a rich and vibrant community but one which constantly challenged the kindergarten staff. How was it possible to meet the needs of all these different children? How could we make every parent and child feel welcome and included in the programme? How could we adequately communicate the theory underpinning our teaching practice and the early childhood curriculum? And most importantly, how was it possible to create meaningful relationships with parents when so many of them spoke little or no English?

I believe that one of the greatest strengths of my kindergarten teaching team was genuine interest that each staff member had about the families who used the kindergarten. Consequently, staff regularly engaged in spontaneous dialogues with parents because they really were interested in finding out about aspects of different cultures, as well as a family's previous experiences in their country of origin. These dialogues often provided insights into children's strengths and interests, and sometimes had interesting spin-offs into the kindergarten programme, e.g. awareness of significant festivals that were then celebrated at the kindergarten. Staff understood that they were both teachers **and learners** and recognised that the parents who came to the kindergarten were an invaluable source of information about their children, their child-rearing and cultural practices.

Spontaneous dialogue often develops between teachers and parents/caregivers when parents/caregivers are given the opportunity to spend time at a centre with their children. One of the key responsibilities of teachers who wish to provide culturally competent care for children is to ensure that the centre is welcoming to all parents. Inviting parents to stay with their children, spending time developing a relationship with them by demonstrating an interest in their culture, and encouraging them to participate and contribute to the programme creates opportunities for spontaneous dialogue to occur between parents and teachers during a session. Although this sounds like an easy thing to do, it sometimes takes effort and persistence to develop trusting relationships that enable parents to feel comfortable staying at the centre.

Key ingredients for successful spontaneous dialogue:

- Provide an environment that welcomes all families - by talking to parents, showing an interest in their culture, finding resources that reflect the cultures of the children attending and including them in the programme.
- Actively encourage parents to stay and spend time with children in the centre whenever they can, and formally invite parents to stay for certain activities – workshops, breakfasts or lunches working bees (Ramsey, 1998, p103).

- Foster teacher curiosity about where children and their families have come from, and recognise how much can be learnt from engaging in meaningful dialogue with parents.
- Don't be frightened about asking questions and inquiring about parents' experiences in their country of origin, their culture, their religion and why they came to New Zealand. This interest can be very validating for parents.
- Find out what first language children and families use and ask parents to help staff develop 'key' vocabulary lists to use with the children. Ask parents to help with correct pronunciation.
- Find out information about the different cultural groups that use your centre – use the library and Internet, and then check out this information with parents at the centre. Use professional development opportunities to broaden understanding about 'culture' and intercultural communication.
- If there are non-English speaking parents using the centre, use other parents who speak the same language to help translate information and help staff develop rapport with these parents. Use translation services if necessary.
- Monitor feelings of comfort or discomfort when talking to parents. Observe which groups of parents are talked to most and work on spending time with those parents that are talked to least.
- Share the information gained from discussions with parents with the teaching team and record it when appropriate.

Recently I worked with kindergarten staff who were wanting to develop a better understanding of issues relating to working with diverse cultures so they could develop their relationships with some Somali families who had started using their kindergarten. These families were initially reluctant to participate in the programme in any way. The staff worked very hard to find ways to develop a rapport with the families by borrowing books from the library about the Muslim faith, finding out information on the Internet, buying children's books that described important religious festivals celebrated by the Somali community, locating picture books written in Somali, asking parents for simple words in Somali to use with the children, and using photos of their children to convey aspects of learning processes to the families etc. This work enabled teachers to demonstrate to their Somali families that they really were interested in their culture and slowly, as the year progressed, the parents became more involved with the programme, began helping the staff, and became more open to developing dialogues.

Creating opportunities for formal interviews

I was fortunate to have the opportunity to record interviews with some of the parents who had children at my kindergarten. I wanted to learn about the experiences these parents had of the New Zealand kindergarten system and compare them with their experiences of early childhood services in their home countries and I was interested in getting the parents to reflect on their process of adapting to the early childhood system in New Zealand. I was amazed at how much I learnt from these very planned and quite formal interviews.

As a result of these interviews I realised that some cultures have very formal relationships with teachers and that relationships with parents in mainstream early childhood education services in New Zealand can seem very informal to them. A formal arrangement is a preferred option for some parents. For example, during an interview with a father who had immigrated to New Zealand with his family from Jordan, I discovered he and his wife had several areas of concern \when he first started his children at the kindergarten that he had not been able to discuss with me

at the time. The system of induction that was practiced at the kindergarten had failed to provide an opportunity for in-depth discussions about his expectations and the kindergarten practice. He expressed this opinion:

"I think it [the programme] should be explored with the family...it's a good idea to interview the family... not just to enrol like I did...it is very important to sit with the family and say well we do this and this...so they know what to expect [from the programme] and for you to know what we expect...how our child should be taught..."

When I reflect upon the induction system in place at our kindergarten at that time, I realise the process was designed to tell parents' about what happened in the kindergarten with the (unconscious) expectation that they would accept it unquestioningly, rather than consciously engaging parents in a two-way discussion about the early childhood programme.

Gonzalez-Mena suggests that intake questionnaires (2001, p28) that ask for cultural information can create important opportunities for information exchange between teachers and parents. This type of questionnaire could provide a useful basis for structuring the formal interview process. For parents with little or no English this is an excellent opportunity for them to talk to teachers with the help of an English-speaking support person.

Key ingredients for successful formal interviews:

- Be well prepared before meeting with parents – develop a set of relevant questions or intake questionnaire.
- Find out about parents' previous experiences of early childhood services in their country of origin.
- Ensure parents have an English-speaking support person with them if they don't speak English fluently. Often parents have their own contacts within the community, e.g. they may have an English-speaking sponsor or friends and family members that speak English. However, it is always useful for teachers to establish contact with people they know who could assist non-English speaking parents, e.g. ex-parents, ESOL tutors.etc.
- Wherever possible ensure key information is available to parents in their own language so they can take this away with them to share with other family members. You may need to negotiate with the employing authority or centre owner to get key information translated.
- Arrange for formal interviews to occur without the distractions of children engaged in play, e.g. in non-contact time or in a quiet room within the centre where parents can feel at ease.
- Share the information you gain from discussions with parents with your teaching team, and record it when appropriate.

Formal interviews will give both teachers and parents a starting point for getting to know each other better, and for teachers to get to know more about the child's interests and his/her family. However, this is only the beginning and may not elicit all the information practitioners feel they need. The information gained at this interview, however, will provide an excellent fund of knowledge that teachers can draw upon for on-going dialogues with parents and caregivers.

One of the most interesting topics for discussion with parents from diverse cultural backgrounds is their experience of early childhood education in their countries of origin. Very often their

children have had experience of early childhood services that are markedly different from the services provided in New Zealand. The next paper in this series *Creating culturally competent care in early childhood services in New Zealand - Part 3: Parents' experiences of different pedagogies* describes three parents' experiences of early childhood programmes in their countries of origin.

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The author

Lisa Terreni (Dip Kindergarten Teaching, B.Ed) works as a professional development facilitator for Early Childhood Development, Wellington, New Zealand.

Providing culturally competent care in early childhood services in New Zealand

Part 3 : Parents' experiences of different early childhood pedagogies

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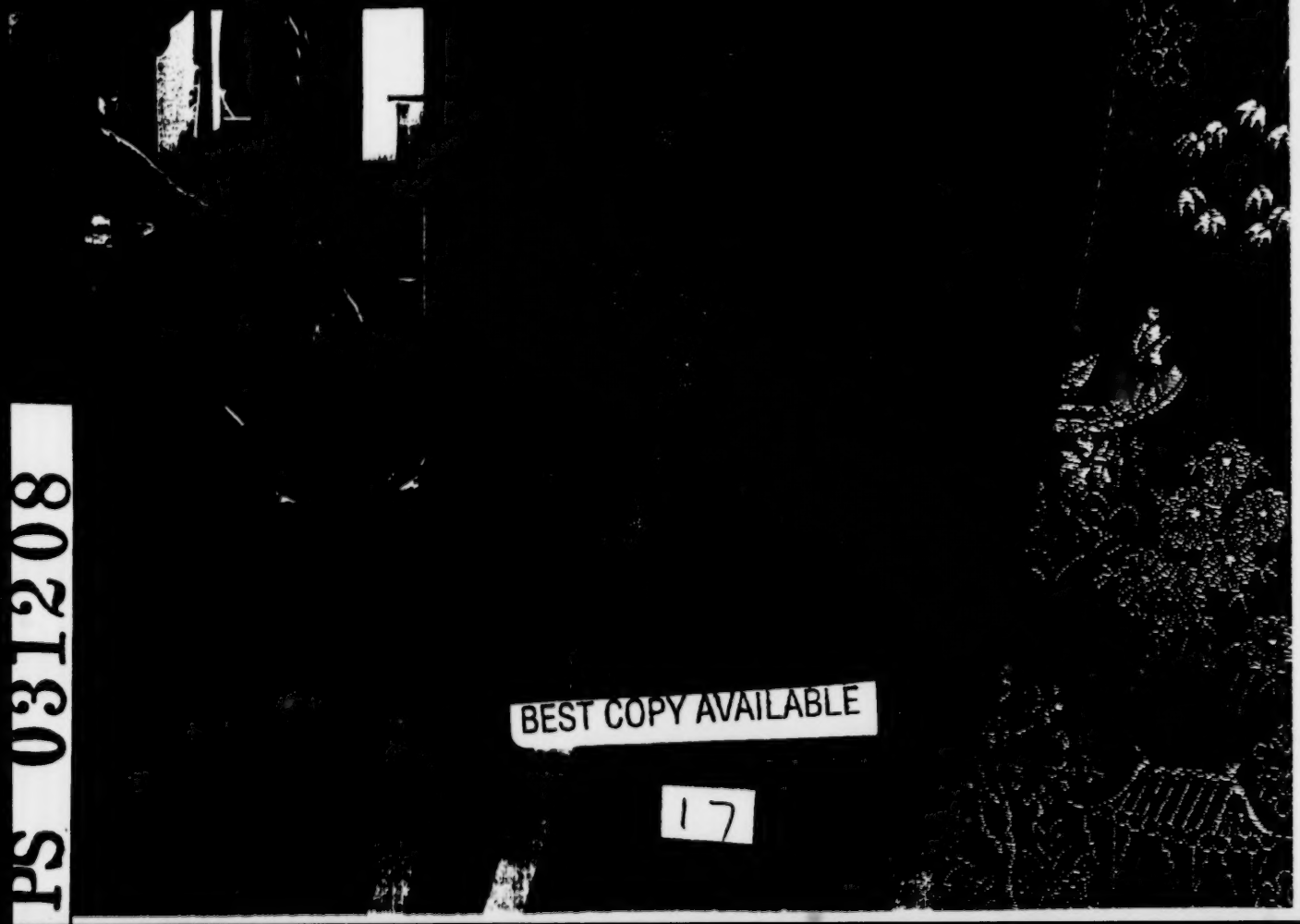

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Parents' experiences of different pedagogies

Lisa Terreni

In *Providing culturally competent care in early childhood services in New Zealand -Part 2: Developing dialogues,* strategies were presented for practitioners to engage in meaningful dialogue with parents and families. It was argued that on-going dialogue is the most successful way for teachers to begin to 'unpack' the early childhood programme for parents, as well as helping early childhood practitioners discover the beliefs and experiences that parents from different cultural backgrounds bring to their new encounter with early childhood programmes in New Zealand.

Families who migrate to New Zealand have often had experiences of early childhood education programmes in their countries of origin. Their previous experiences of early childhood pedagogy are sometimes quite different from that practiced in New Zealand. Discovering these differences by talking with parents can be illuminating and can highlight areas of potential discomfort for both parents and practitioners.

For the purposes of this paper I interviewed three parents from different cultural backgrounds who have had experience of early childhood services in their countries of origin and whose children have also attended early childhood services in New Zealand. At the end of each interview there is an analysis of points of difference that practitioners may want to consider as topics for discussion with parents.

An early childhood experience in Jordan

Mohammed Shubair, his wife and three children came to New Zealand in 1996 from Jordan. Mohammed, a trained medical doctor who had practiced medicine in Jordan for many years, came to New Zealand because of job opportunities and the volatile political situation in the Middle East.

> *Was the kindergarten your children went to in Jordan significantly different from the educational environment you found when you came to New Zealand?*
>
> "Yes it was! Of course the first big thing was the language difference. The kindergarten in Jordan did not have the freedom as the kindergartens do here. In the kindergarten in Jordan the kids cannot draw and spoil their clothes, get wet and dirty with the sand and everything. In Jordan they are not allowed to do this. The other thing is going on trips and to museums. In Jordan we don't have those facilities available... At the kindergarten they used to teach the children English words...In our country we teach Arabic and English."
>
> *You described how the kindergarten in Jordan did not have messy activities. How was it for you coming into a kindergarten in New Zealand that allowed these activities?*

"We were so surprised actually because in Jordan when I finished my work and I would go and pick them [the children] up from the kindergarten and I would wait five or ten minutes outside because maybe Lana's hair is not brushed well or she has some food or stains on her so the teachers would not allow me to take Lana home in this way!

When we arrived in New Zealand and our children started kindergarten my wife was so surprised and said, "Look they are wet all over, and all stained!". We asked our friends "why are they allowing this?", especially as you know how my kids they love the water, especially Hala! Everyday when she came home from the kindy she was all wet and we had to change all her clothes. Well, in our country they are not allowed to do those things!"

Did this upset you?

"Yes, because we have to change their clothes and at home we try to keep them tidy and clean. But when we find that all the other people do the same thing then it was a problem just for us...but not any more!

I think it the programme should be explored with the family and it's a good idea to interview the family... not just to enrol like I did. It is very important to sit with the family and say well we do this and this...so the family knows what to expect from the programme and for you to know what we expect...how our child should be taught."

The interview with Mohammed highlights some of the areas that and he and his wife found challenging when his children started attending kindergarten in New Zealand.

Mohammed and his family's experience of early childhood education in Jordan was of a formal and structured system. Their expectations were framed by this experience and they found some things challenging when they first started their children at a New Zealand kindergarten. State-funded New Zealand kindergartens tend to be informal and operate with a child-centred pedagogy that encourages and allows active, hands-on learning experiences in a relatively unstructured environment.

Mohammed raises the issue of the children 'spoiling their clothes' and identifies this as a problem for him and his wife. It is unlikely that a New Zealand kindergarten teacher would anticipate that children getting dirty during the course of their creative engagement in the programme would be a problem!

Mohammed and his family would have preferred a formal interview with teachers about the programme before the children started at the kindergarten. Introduction to the New Zealand kindergarten system is often a more informal process, generally taking place when a child starts and over a period of time as teachers get to know parents and children better.

An early childhood experience in India

Usha Khanna came to New Zealand from Bombay, one of the largest cities in India, with her husband and two children in 1993. Her youngest daughter, Risha, was then four years old and started kindergarten soon after they arrived in New Zealand.

You told me that Risha went to preschool in India for one year... what is pre-school like in India?

Well, it is completely different from here...quite the opposite! Risha started kindy there at the age of three. There they teach them to learn to read and write. There she learned 1-20 - to count, and she could write A – Z in capital letters and small letters and she knew many poems, in our language as well as in English.

So was it like a school with desks?

Yes, it had benches and desks and they had to go and sit in one place...they couldn't move around here and there in the class. They have some swings outside and when there is a break they can play outside but not inside the class. They have charts all around the walls of the food and animals to teach them but nothing to play with in the class. It is all sitting down and the teacher is there at the blackboard, she'll say 'apple' and children will repeat after her.

It sounds as if it was very different from New Zealand kindergartens?

Yes, but now Risha likes it here! There are lots to things to play with and I was amazed at how many things there are for children to do!

We started kindergarten [in New Zealand] after the holidays and I was with Risha all the time because Risha had language problems and we were new to the place and I was not happy to leave her alone. I wanted to stay with her so I was there all the time with her and slowly, slowly she was happy there...she was very attached to her teachers! And I also got friendly with them and I was happy to come there because the teachers were very good to me.

It is interesting because I think you said the kindergarten teachers were some of the first people that you met here. Is this correct?

Yes, and at the kindergarten I met other parents. The first friend you can say I made was at kindergarten - the teacher Jo. She was very good to me, and she used to talk to me about India, and how I feel here and if I had any problems. She would say 'don't worry we will help you!' She was very good and she helped me a lot...so I was very happy to come to kindergarten.

You stayed at kindergarten with Risha for about six months didn't you?

Yes, all the time I would stay there...then slowly, slowly she would want me to go back so I would stay for one hour and then I would go back [home] and then I would

come back early... I felt I should stay with her...she was very small and very attached to me so she wanted me all the time so I was there with her.

How would you have felt if the teachers had told you to go?

I would not have been happy because that's the thing in India, they don't allow you to stay in the class. Once the child is there in the classroom they tell you to go out...and there in India I would wait outside the class till Risha had calmed down! So here when they said I could stay here I was so surprised and so happy. The first time I asked if I could stay the teacher said 'Yes! As long as you want!'

I loved to do cooking there...I was happy that you liked Indian food! All the children came to me and got to know me...everybody used to come to me and say 'Usha can you help me!' It was very good and I was very happy. It was very good for me.

Did some activities at the kindergarten made you anxious?

I was happy with all the things...I counted one day, there were more than 20 things - like play-dough, dressing and painting and colouring...and the paint and they can do what ever they like with the paint! In India, first of all there is no paint for kids and they are very careful about what children do with their clothes but here it's free! What ever they want they can do! The only thing I was worried about was the carpentry section, they have got hammers and all, and I was worried someone would come and hit my Risha with a hammer...I was not happy with that section but the rest was fantastic!

Here I think children enjoy their childhood. They get their childhood! Like playing with the sand, and paints and colouring...it's what the children need and what they want they can do...like get messy or whatever. First I was worried Risha was getting paint on her clothes but they love playing with water, and the sand and the mud and everything...and that's very good...now I realise it was all very good for Risha!"

The interview with Usha Khanna illustrates some areas that she appreciated in the New Zealand system.

Usha had experienced a very structured and formal early childhood education system in India. Hand-on learning opportunities were minimal and the teacher dictated the range of activities children engaged in. Usha appreciated the range of different activities provided at the New Zealand kindergarten, however, some of the hands-on activities, e.g. the carpentry area, she felt were dangerous for children. She was initially worried about her daughter getting paint on her clothes, but came to appreciate that 'messy' experiences were good for her daughter's learning.

Usha had experienced a system in India that excluded parental involvement and was relieved to discover that the New Zealand system accommodated her need to stay with her child. She was able to settle her child at the child's own pace, and become familiar with the kindergarten environment. This was important for both child and parent.

Usha made friends by attending the kindergarten with her child. She made friends with the teachers who valued her input and who spent time with her discussing her feelings about being in the new country. She also met other parents through the kindergarten.

It is important to add that by regularly attending the kindergarten with her daughter, Usha participated in the kindergarten programme as a parent-helper and, eventually, as a paid reliever. This experience later gave Usha the confidence to get paid employment as a caregiver at a day-care centre and then later as a Barnardos family caregiver.

Kindergarten teaching in China

Mandy and her husband came to New Zealand in 1996 from Guangzhou City in south China. Mandy was a trained kindergarten teacher who taught for 6 years at a kindergarten in Guangzhou. Mandy now has a two and a half year old son, Raymond, and she teaches at Yau Yih Yun, a Cantonese speaking pre-school in Wellington.

Mandy describes kindergarten teaching in China as 'very hard work'. Because parents have to go to work, children start attending early childhood facilities at a very young age, usually starting at an early childhood service at 6 months old. Some children stay at the early childhood service during the week and go home with their parents at weekends. Kindergarten programmes are only provided for 3, 4 and 5 year old children.

Kindergartens are typically provided and supported by a company or business for the children of its employees. Children usually arrive at the kindergarten around 7.30 am and domestic staff give children their breakfast. Teachers use this time to talk to parents about the children. The kindergarten programme begins at 9.00 am and is very structured, with sessions in the mornings dedicated to teaching curriculum subjects such as maths, science, language etc. Lunch break is from 12.00 – 2.30 pm and children usually have a sleep before recommencing the programme at 2.30 pm.

In the afternoon children play teacher-directed games 'to calm the children down' until parents come to collect their children at 4.30 pm. Mandy said the New Zealand idea of 'child-directed, free play' does not exist in the Chinese early childhood context. She said that if teachers in China introduced free-play into their programmes they would be seen as 'not doing their jobs properly.' An average kindergarten class has about 40 children and is taught by one teacher and a teacher aide – teacher aides are often first year teachers.

Teachers need to do a lot of preparation and lesson planning before each class. Kindergartens have a Director who oversees the teachers' work and checks their lesson planning. Much of what is taught in the programme is determined by the Ministry of Education. Mandy found kindergarten teaching quite stressful due to the amount of work teachers were required to do and the pressure from their Directors.

Other differences Mandy described were:

- Kindergarten children wear uniforms.
- Kindergartens often enter competitions with each other, e.g. performance of nationalistic songs and dances.

- Some activities found in early childhood services in New Zealand, such as carpentry, would be considered too dangerous for children in China.
- Children never sit on the floor in Chinese kindergartens as the floors are concrete and it is considered that the floor is too dirty to sit on. Children always sit on chairs.
- Water play and sand play are very slowly being introduced into kindergarten programmes in China but children do not have the same freedom to play with these activities as children do in New Zealand.

The interview with Mandy illustrates a very formal, structured and teacher directed teaching system, where the content of kindergarten programmes is carefully controlled. Concepts about play and the types of play opportunities experienced at a Chinese kindergarten are teacher directed rather than child-centred and some activities that would be found in a New Zealand early childhood service are considered inappropriate, e.g. carpentry.

Mandy's experiences of early childhood services in New Zealand, as a teacher, and a playgroup parent, have been very positive. She enjoys the more relaxed attitude to running an early childhood programme and likes getting feedback from parents. However, Mandy has decided that when her son Raymond is old enough she will send him to a Montessori preschool because she likes their more structured approach.

Conclusion

Canella (1997, p135) challenges proponents of child-centred early childhood pedagogy to be aware that "child-centred pedagogy and play, as central tenets within educational practice, have been created in a particular culture with particular values and biases. Applying the notion of play to all peoples in all situations denies the multiple value structures, knowledges, and views of the world which are created by people in diverse contexts." It is important when discussing different early childhood pedagogies to remember that they are culturally determined and are likely to be valid and appropriate in their specific cultural context.

These three examples of parents' experiences of early childhood pedagogies in their countries of origin illustrate some quite fundamental differences to early childhood services in New Zealand. It is important to consider that although some parents may not have had their children attend early childhood services in their country of origin, their own experiences of early childhood may also colour their expectations. It is also important not to assume that parents who have come to New Zealand from countries that have similar early childhood systems in place, e.g. Australia, Britain and the US, will be immediately au fait with the New Zealand curriculum. Allowing time for discussion with parents about their experiences will enable both parents and practitioners to develop dialogue and increase their understanding.

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